

NORMAN ADLER

# Faith and Reason

MOST OF US who work in higher education are, at our cores, concerned with the “essence” of college, with helping our students come to know themselves and, to quote Matthew Arnold (2006, 5), “the best which has been thought and said in the world.” We try to convey the best of what has been developed in our area of scholarship and to liberally educate our students in its traditions. Our students want to prepare for vocation and to develop their social and intellectual skills. Yet, especially as they make the transition from high school to college, students also want answers to the “Big Questions” of meaning and value. As shown in classic studies of cognitive development among college students and young professionals (see Perry 1999; Knefelkamp 1999; Knefelkamp

and Slepitsky 1978),

high school graduates come to college seeking a set of “right” answers; they leave, older and wiser, as committed relativists. The trick is to keep them asking the Big Questions as they develop intellectually in our academies.

Our students are spiritual. According to a study of student religiosity conducted by the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA), 80 percent of students express a strong interest in spirituality (Astin et al. 2005). This could, of course, refer to a kind of Emersonian transcendentalism. But they are not only spiritual, they are religious. Over half of all students attend religious services at least once per month. Indeed, according to the UCLA study, eight students in ten attended religious services during the past year. Even if some went grudgingly with their families, that’s a very large number. Moreover, almost eight students in ten believe in God. The new college student may need to exert independence from hearth and

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family, but sometimes even that age-typical separation takes a surprising turn. A recent issue of the *Wall Street Journal* featured an article on children who become more religious than their parents (Rosman 2007).

## The faculty and the questions we ask

Although there is a strong counter-current to piety on college and university campuses, a faculty survey included in the UCLA study revealed that about 80 percent of professors consider themselves to be spiritual persons. We professors haven’t forgotten the Big Questions either. As in all surveys, however, the “devil” or the “deity” is in the details. Faculty in religious colleges and small liberal colleges are more spiritual than their counterparts in large public or private universities. In addition to correlating with type of school, it relates to

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academic specialization: when asked if colleges should be concerned with students' spiritual development, the greatest agreement came from faculty in health sciences, humanities, and education; the least came from faculty in the physical and biological sciences.

The current "crisis," the one that gets a lot of press, is the "faith-reason" fight. I follow it because I teach biological psychology (from an evolutionary perspective) in an institution associated with Orthodox Judaism. I don't find a conflict; but so many people do that I sometimes wonder if I am missing something interesting—or at least fun. I quoted Matthew Arnold above because he was, in the 1860s, the quintessential humanist—classicist, poet, and defender of *belles lettres*—and because he got into a spat with Thomas Huxley about the relative roles of literature and science. (Religious

questions were certainly lurking in their argument.) One of the most cited poems in all of English literature, Arnold's "Dover Beach," concludes:

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's  
shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night wind, down the vast edges  
drear  
And naked shingles of the world.  
Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and  
flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.  
Troubled by the import of continental higher criticism of the Bible and by that very Victorian British product, Darwinian evolution, Arnold wrote the poem in 1861. Nearly a century and a half later, armies (each proclaiming the other's ignorance) are still clashing over the same shoals of religion and science. And students are perplexed.

## **Reason and faith on campus**

Since the Enlightenment, scholars have had a tough time handling religion. Religion is not just about faith and reason. It is also about emotions, self-examination, social perceptions and evaluations, and prejudices. The "solution" to the faith-reason debate—at least for the university—is not to solve it but to study it and to let it enrich the curriculum.

William James, in *The Will to Believe* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, set the stage for a solution by introducing a radical shift in epistemology. In offering pragmatism as the framework for knowledge, James birthed all of American psychology and a

good chunk of philosophy. That which drives humankind and forms the basis of the “passional hypotheses” by which we live is the proper subject of psychology—including the psychology of religion. We may not be able to prove or disprove the existence of God by empirical methods, but we can evaluate its effects on human behavior.

James’s pragmatism is not a bad formula for bringing the mysterium into the light of scientific analysis. In fact, the recent proposal by Harvard University’s general education committee for a “Reason and Faith” requirement was part of an effort to move toward a values-centered curriculum. The proposal was withdrawn, following rationalist critique, as being too narrow; but for some, the entire curriculum was too values-oriented. In almost every curricular reform, there is a point of contention over the sciences or other positivistic disciplines. Do we teach “appreciation” or “how to do it”? Do we teach “about it” or “it”?

So, there may be a bit of a conflict on campus. Conflicts are good. In the academy, argumentation, reason, analysis, and debate are the tools by which knowledge is advanced and transmitted. Culture wars are things outside our walls; they are made into course topics, taught, and savored as social problems. The historical examples form good literature: Galileo and the church; Socrates and the Athenian governors; Biblical Aaron arguing for the human need to represent concretely the divine versus his brother Moses’s insistence on abstract logocentrism; Creon and Antigone disputing the role of conscience and authority. Safely distant, they may leave our cores untouched. But what happens when the culture war—or conflict of civilizations—passes through the walls of today’s academy? What happens when the fundamental questions about which students fret are preempted by the debates of scholars? There may be a conflict between student educational need and scholarly debate. Indeed, just such a conflict may be occurring now.

### Some sources of the conflict

There have been intra-campus conflicts before now. The medieval European university, based on the trivium and quadrivium (the former an instantiation of the trinity), evolved into a rather more scientific institution in the German universities that emphasized detailed,

systematic knowledge (*Wissenschaft*). In the twentieth century, the American university democratized the system, producing a “culture of aspiration” in which students might enter the academy based on merit rather than background. The historical transitions through which the university passed led to conflicts as bloody as those we have in the contemporary university. Arnold, as inspector of schools (a monad cohabiting the same body as the scholar/poet), strove for a classical education bringing “sweetness and light” to a materialist British culture threatened by modernism (evolution, scholastic study of religion).

Today, it sometimes appears to be a shouting match. Instead of two sets of players, there are three: the rational atheists, the theistic religionists, and the postmodernists who deny the possibility of any permanent value system or Lyotardian “metanarrative,” whether scientific or religious (Lyotard 1984).

Perry (1999), Boyer (2002), Knefelkamp (1999), Astin (Astin et al. 2005), and Kuh (Kuh & Whitt 1988)—the psychometricians of the undergraduate mind—have commented on the need for values clarification. Most American students in most of the country are religious—certainly more religious than the faculty, particularly the science faculty—and are struggling with family relations; they are trying to make their way in a twenty-first-century rendering of Arnold’s “darkling plain.” Though the *Wall Street Journal* article mentioned above describes students who turn more religious than their parents, the student arriving on campus and gelatinizing his or her parents’ religion is the canonical case. If Durkheim (2001) is right that society is bound together by religion, that God is society functionally, then this moving away is difficult indeed. This may be one of the reasons faith-based colleges are receiving support from parents afraid of “losing” their children.

The conflict between “religious” and “secular” is a complicated one. It is part of students’ evolving quest for self-definition. Anthropologists point out that virtually every human society has displayed ritualistic, religious, and/or supernaturally oriented behavior. Indeed, one of the most active areas of biological psychology today is the study of the evolutionary origins of the religious practices and beliefs as specialized forms of categorical thinking and behaving. Biologically speaking, religion is a

species-typical behavior; and species-typical behaviors have strong cognitive and motivational mechanisms driving the individual organisms comprising the species. The so-called biopsychological roots of religion are not only matters of faith and reason. There is also an emotional tug, a set of “aha” experiences.

Religion is a universal. It works best not only when it is rational, but also when it contains that “something special.” Scholars in religious studies have been discussing what’s “special” for a long time. There is almost always something visceral in it, certainly something emotional. Faith and reason are cognitive abilities; they are “believing in” and “believing that.” The human condition also includes emotions, allowing us to experience feelings of awe. One of the pioneers in the study of religion, Rudolph Otto (1950, 12), grappled

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with the extra-rational “mystery” of the religious experience. Non-rational should not be confused with irrational, he warns. He describes it as *numinous*: “The feeling...may come sweeping like a gentle

tide.... It may pass...continuing...thrillingly vibrant and resonant.” Otto drew the analogy between religion and the perception of beauty. To move one step beyond discussions of beauty, and to cite one of Woody Allen’s best lines—perhaps mixing sacred and profane—sex is dirty “only if you do it right.” Religion is fullest precisely when it is more than cognitive.

There can also be a negative side to the emotive or religious experience: the discomfort of the adolescent asking the Big Questions that sometimes have unhappy answers. At the most extreme, depression or angst can occur—even in the most religious of college environments.

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Adolescent, collegiate despair has no more extreme value than that represented by Theodore Kaczynski, the so-called “Unabomber.” I knew Ted slightly; we were classmates at Harvard. The good news is that we knew he was strange; the bad news is that he wasn’t the strangest “dude” on campus. (Many of the other strange ones got tenure.) In *Harvard and the Unabomber* (2002), Alston Chase describes Kaczynski’s reaction as one of “despair.” Despair is a very good word; it is the antipode, not of faith, but of joy; it is the “bad news” countering the “good news” (of the evangelist). Chase deconstructs Kaczynski—the child of an unhappy home, a student who was perhaps admitted to college too young, and most telling for our purposes, the product of an inherently conflicted general education curriculum at Harvard. Based upon the positivism of the natural sciences and mathematics, on the one hand, and the goal of inculcating a humanistic (Christian American) set of values on the other, Chase sees the Harvard general education curriculum of the 1950s and 1960s as being at war with itself. From humanists, Kaczynski learned that science threatened civilization; from the science faculty, he learned that positivistic science cannot be stopped. This led to an irreconcilable conflict—and to either madness (a defense rejected by the legal system) or anarchic despair.

While an extreme, the case of the Unabomber points to the role of intellectual conflict—coupled, to be sure, with idiosyncratic biographical influences—in the production of psychological tensions during the adolescent years. According to Perry (1999) and Knefelkamp (1999), most students adjust and adopt a somewhat relativistic acceptance of differing points of views. The argument I offer here is that it is quite proper for universities to address intellectual questions that concern students. Each faculty member will do so within a discipline and within a worldview.

### **Contemporary conditions**

In part, the “Reason and Faith” requirement was dropped from the current Harvard curriculum review because of concerns about why, of all the cultural questions, this particular question was being privileged. The larger question is whether the curriculum was too values-oriented. This is the same question raised by the 1950s Harvard general education curriculum. Probably,

the question has been asked in some form on every campus in America. So, let’s take a look at a few works that have been disseminated widely in the academic community. It is not really faith versus reason as process but the subject of each. Reason is a set of mental operations (studied by cognitive scientists) that are used by organisms to derive conclusions or hypothesis from certain premises. It is the premises that are in question. The subject can be the structure of the atom, the nature of a deity, or the smile of the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. None has ever been seen—at least by the ordinary naked eye. However, all have been described, discussed, and analyzed by reason. The argument does not really pit faith against reason. Rather, it concerns whether both can be legitimately applied within an individual’s worldview. The first citation, a defense of coupling faith and reason within the religious framework, was written by an eminent Catholic theologian:

Critique of modern reason from within has nothing to do with putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment and rejecting the insights of the modern age. The positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly: we are all grateful for the marvelous possibilities that it has opened up for mankind.... The scientific ethos, moreover, is...the will to be obedient to the truth, and, as such, it embodies an attitude which belongs to the essential decisions of the Christian spirit.... Modern scientific reason quite simply has to accept the rational structure of matter and the correspondence between our spirit and the prevailing rational structures of nature as a given, on which its methodology has to be based.

The second is the work of an eminent biologist: the God Hypothesis [holds that] there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence, who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it...“the God hypothesis” is a scientific hypothesis about the universe, which should be analyzed as skeptically as any other....

The third is a counter-attack against the atheist. It asserts that God is *not* like any other object of empirical scientific investigation. When philosophers of religion refer to God in ordinary language, they are doing so for convenience in communication, not for analytical explication. A Jewish philosopher once argued strenuously



that God is neither actually body nor a potentiality in a body (a proposition dealing with the Father, separate from the critical Christian theology surrounding the nature of Jesus's relation to the Father):

We are to believe that he is incorporeal, that His unity is physical neither potentially nor actually....None of the attributes can be predicated of Him, neither motion, nor rest, for example....Whenever Scripture describes Him in corporeal terms like walking, standing, sitting, speaking, and the like, it speaks metaphorically....The Torah speaks in human language....He has no body at all, actually or potentially.

Oh, the sources. The first, the eminent Catholic theologian, is Pope Benedict XVI (2006); the second, the eminent biologist and the prime of evangelical atheists, is the Oxford evolutionist Richard Dawkins (2006, 2, 31);

the third is the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1972, 418) articulating the third of his thirteen articles of faith incumbent on Jews.

Dawkins concludes that intelligence is the product of Darwinian evolution and that evolutionary process is the only true basis for values. Rejecting faith as superstition, Dawkins is continuing the Enlightenment program—particularly the British post-Enlightenment distilled through positivist science, which rejects anything not empirically verifiable and observable. Since the natural theological basis for the existence of a deity has largely diminished over the past two centuries, but the urge to find reasons for design in nature has grown, there are two separate responses. This history has been chronicled most thoroughly by the philosopher Michael Ruse (2004, 2006), who speaks of evolutionary studies as three sets of

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inquiries: a set of facts or observations, a theory, and an explanatory system. This last, which he calls “evolutionism,” has been battling “creationism,” which originated in a rather restricted interpretation of the Bible that has developed largely in America and has been driven largely by fundamentalist Christians, with a few Jews thrown in to provide ecumenical balance.

Dawkins and his supporters are, I believe, responding to a rise in politico-religious fundamentalism, which has intruded on the scientific enterprise with concepts like Intelligent Design. This concept is not new; it was raised to counter Darwin—in fact, versions of the

argument are ancient. But it has taken on a new political life. Science is now on the defensive, at least in conservative American political circles. While there are religious scientists who are trying to keep religious doctrine and scientific reasoning in proper perspective, it is not just the positivist scientist who pits faith against reason as an essential dialectic. Some religious fundamentalists do the same, and when they win a school board vote, it sets our teeth on edge. “Faith” and “reason” used in this way represent a Lyotardian *differend*—a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a

rule of judgment applicable to both arguments (Lyotard 1988). The rules of logical positivism preclude papal speculation on reason operating upon a faith-based revelation. Scriptural literalism precludes empirical evidence that apparently contradicts revelation. Both science and religion are being gutted; both specific faith and reason are being attacked by a postmodernism according to which no single metanarrative can attain truth. The Church could suppress Galileo; the postmodern philosopher can now deny both Galileo and the Church as authoritative sources of “truth.”

### (Temporary) truce?

So, where does this leave the discourse on campus? If students take a course in the philosophy of science or evolution, they will come upon some of these arcane questions. I guarantee, though, that they will go back to the dorms and talk about leading the “good life.” Some scientists, who may also be religious practitioners, will continue to examine how evolution and biology interact with modern theology. I suggest that we continue the debate but that, this time, we include the students. Departments of literature offer courses in utopias and dystopias. James’s monumental work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which is standard reading now in psychology and religion courses, could be brought into a new course: “The Varieties of Irreligious Experience.” Sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists are all concerned with the rise of global political fundamentalism. In Divinity schools, faculty study “It”; they prepare ministers, priests, and rabbis. These schools often have eminent scholars who could teach “About It” to undergraduates, without violating anyone’s intellectual integrity. Why is religion universal? Is it biological? Why did the pope’s lecture, excerpted above, include a section criticizing the use of violence in spreading the word of God that lead to mass protests and to the shooting of four nuns by angry fundamentalists?

Teaching the Big Questions means just that: the Big Questions stay. Disciplines emerge; we gain new tools; we accumulate new art and literature and new philosophical arguments. But the questions remain part of the human enterprise. We should teach all of it. Matthew Arnold would approve. □

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